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THE MYTH OF AMERICAN IMPERIALISM

BY
Otto H. Kahn



From COMMITTEE OF AMERICAN BUSINESS MEN
15 Park Row, New York

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The speakers were Professor Edwin Meade Earle of Columbia University, two leading Socialists, viz.: Mr. Morris Hillquit and Dr. Scott Nearing, and Mr. Otto H. Kahn. In his address, which is reproduced in the following pages, Mr. Kahn denied the allegation of American Imperialism.

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THE MYTH OF AMERICAN IMPERIALISM

I AM in the midst of the active life of business. I must keep my eyes open to the realities of things. To hold my place I must be fairly competent to discern currents, impulses and tendencies in our national life. I do not hesitate to say that never, in the thirty years concerning which I can speak from personal observation, have I encountered Imperialism, in this country.

Looking over the history of the United States, and granting one single contingent reservation dating back three-quarters of a century, i.e., the war against Mexico, it may be asserted justly and truthfully, I believe, and without pharisaical self-complacency, that America has made no unfair use of her power, that she has not employed her strength to subjugate and exploit other peoples, that she has resisted the temptation of forcible aggrandizement, that she has pursued a foreign policy which aimed to keep in the path of justice, and that, if any lapses did occur in her international dealings, they were of the head, not the heart. Some of you may answer: "America did not covet, because she did not need." That opens up a question not of fact, but of speculation, not of

ascertaining actualities, but of attributing motives. I believe you will agree with me that no useful purpose would be served in pursuing a discussion along lines which could lead to no demonstrable issue.

I. *The Allegation of Political or Military Imperialism*

You will point an accusing finger and you will hurl the challenging question: "What about Hayti and San Domingo, what about Nicaragua, Honduras, and so forth?" It is true we did send military forces to these countries. There did, most regrettably, occur some bloodshed. In the execution of our program we did commit some errors in judgment and in manners. We did, in certain measures, proceed bunglingly and clumsily, as Governments and their agents not infrequently do, especially when, as in the cases under discussion, the task to be undertaken is an unusual and unexpected one, and there are neither traditions which afford guidance nor a trained personnel to attend to the execution. (Incidentally, the very absence of such personnel tends to prove how little the thoughts of our Government and people were on Imperialism.)

But the test is in the answer to the question which in my turn I ask of you: "What was our purpose? Did we go to oppress and exploit, did we go to add these territories to our domain? Or did we go to end an inveterate rule of tyranny, malefactions and turmoil, to set up

decent and orderly government and the rule of law, to foster progress, to establish stable conditions and with them the basis for prosperity to the populations concerned?"

I think there can be no doubt that it was these latter things we aimed to attain. And having measurably accomplished the task, we did withdraw, or shall withdraw. We left behind, or shall leave behind, a few persons charged with the collection and proper administration of certain revenues, but such arrangements, to which I shall refer more fully later on, are no more in the nature of exploitation or oppression than the appointment of a person under a deed of trust is in the nature of exploitation or oppression.

These countries are almost at our door. When we look out of our national window, they are within our sight. They are situated athwart one of our main trade and strategic routes. It is within our duty as neighbors, within our natural rights and our legitimate self-interest to see to it that they cease to be centers of perpetual disturbance, that the rudiments of decent, orderly and civilizing government be observed by, and for the benefit of, their people, that these fertile regions become adequately useful to the world and to their own inhabitants.

To the argument that we ourselves are not spotless, that our governmental ways do not function to perfection, that we have lynchings unavenged by the law, that crime, law defiance and abuses

are not unknown in this country,—to that argument I will refer only long enough to say that, while it may have a certain efficacy in dialectics, it seems to me manifest, for obvious reasons, that it has no weight or bearing in a sober discussion aiming not at oratorical laurels but at the ascertainment of facts. (Similarly, I will leave aside the contention that the very existence of America is based upon Imperialism, inasmuch as we took the country away from the Indians.)

You may charge me with the offense of condoning high crimes and misdemeanors against the hallowed doctrine of “self-determination.” Well, I frankly admit that my respect for, and allegiance to, that doctrine is by no means free from reservations. Neither nations nor human beings have an unqualified right to self-determination. Neither a nation nor a human being has a right to make a public nuisance of itself. Self-determination is limited by considerations of the welfare of the community. Individuals that are proven incompetent, shiftless, vicious, or affected with contagious disease, are subject to appropriate measures on the part of the State. Nations whom long and incontrovertible experience has proved to be unable or unwilling to so administer their estates as to make them conform to the minimum requirements of the world’s work, who, instead of developing, impede development,—nations, when finally so adjudged by the consensus of the world’s public opinion, are

properly subject to reasonable measures of intervention, not in the spirit of the strong despoiling the weak, but in the spirit of the strong aiding the weak, of advanced civilization helping retarded civilization, of light being let into dark places.

The purposes, tendencies and character of an individual or a nation can often be discerned as much from what they deliberately refrain from doing as from what they do. An imperialistic nation would have appropriated Cuba after the Spanish-American War, as a matter of course,—or, if not then, would have availed itself of one of the repeated occasions which offered themselves since then, to do so. America did not appropriate Cuba. The wise and reciprocally useful treaty which she made with her, bears no resemblance to appropriation. Again, after the World War, America had opportunity to extend her territorial sway. She refused to do so. In the closing year of the Taft Administration and the first two years of the Wilson Administration, America had strong provocation and plausible ground for intervention of an integral and more or less lasting character in Mexico. It is well-known that several European Governments expected no less, and that strong pressure was brought to bear upon our Government to do so. No greater temptation than authority over that vast and rich country could have been offered to any nation. No nation even faintly touched with Imperialism would have declined the opportunity

which the then existing constellation of circumstances offered both actually and sentimentally. America did resist that temptation and did decline that opportunity.

I would add that if America had meant to go in for Imperialism, her choice of objectives would prove her a singularly inept "picker." Surely, there was far bigger game to be bagged than the Caribbeans and the other places where she is alleged, principally, to have indulged in that sport. The additional trade or control of raw materials, which were to be obtained in those countries, are as nothing compared with our total balance sheet; the wealth which might be drawn from them is a drop in the bucket compared with the profitable opportunities available at home or beckoning elsewhere abroad. What worth-while inducement was there for us to pursue Imperialism in those parts of the globe? Commercially, the stake was not worth playing for. From the point of view of strategic requirements, the American Government could doubtless have obtained what is judged needful, for a not too exorbitant monetary consideration, by simple purchase and sale.

Owing to the limitation of the time available, I cannot enter into the matter of America's ownership of the Philippines, except to point out that it came to us as an unforeseen incident of the Spanish-American War, unsought and decidedly unwanted, but—having come—it involves a national responsibility which, in self-respect and in duty, we

are bound to discharge, and of which we cannot divest ourselves until it is fairly discharged. Likewise, time does not permit me to answer, in anticipation, such conclusions as subsequent speakers of the evening may presumably draw from the circumstances surrounding America's construction of the Panama Canal. I will confine myself to saying that, whatever may be one's opinion as to President Roosevelt's manner of proceeding, the aim in view and accomplished by him fits into no reasonable definition of Imperialism.

2. The Allegation of Economic Imperialism

Some of you, while perhaps inclined not to insist upon the charge of Political or Military Imperialism, may yet maintain the arraignment of Economic or Financial Imperialism.

As to Economic Imperialism, I know of no instance, within the time of my observation, in which that has been practiced, unless you choose to apply the term to the legitimate advancement and defense of American trade. In the ordinary pursuit of commerce, it has occurred that American business men have sought, and have obtained, concessions in foreign countries. The word "concession" has, and in the past not unfrequently deserved to have, a somewhat sinister sound. In modern American practice it has meant nothing more than that, before engaging capital, effort and enterprise in out-of-the-way

places of the world, those concerned want to be assured that they are not setting out on a wild goose chase, but that certain functions and opportunities in definite territories, on definite terms, for a definite length of time, are assigned to them contractually and cannot be taken away from them capriciously.

It is a proper and natural exercise of the function of Government that official cognizance should be taken of the granting of such concessions and that the moral support of the Government should be granted to American citizens for the undisturbed exercise of their rights thereunder, provided always that there is no taint of fraud or corruption in their original obtainment, that they are not unconscionable in their essence, and that they may not justly be held to have lapsed through the fault of the holder. It does happen that American concession-hunters in their eagerness "bite off more than they can chew," and in such a case, our Government should not—nor, as far as I am aware, does it—pursue a "dog-in-the-manger" policy.

I believe the following points may be regarded as established:

1. Our State Department does not lie awake nights seeking to obtain concessions for American citizens or stimulating them to obtain concessions for themselves.
2. It attempts to use its moral influence against the granting of concessions

unfairly discriminatory in favor of other nations as against Americans, precisely as it discountenances concessions unfairly discriminatory in favor of Americans as against other nations.

3. Its policy is not to encourage the granting of exclusive rights, be it to Americans or to citizens of other nations, but on the contrary our Government stands forth as the champion of the open door and equality of opportunity for all comers, wherever practicable in the nature of the case.
4. It takes due cognizance of the grant of concessions (reasonably warranted as to terms and conditions) to American citizens, but it never goes beyond the exercise of its moral influence in maintaining the rights of its nationals under such concessions, and I have known it to decline to do so when it was not satisfied as to the cleanness or fairness of the American contention.
5. The game of concession-hunting or otherwise exploiting opportunities in foreign countries is neither as popular among Americans as some of you would suppose it to be nor as profitable as it is "cracked up" to be. I do not claim his relative aloofness from that game as a sign of superior virtue in the American, but rather attribute it to the fact that the opportunities in his own country are still so great—in contrast to the state of affairs among the principal nations of

Europe—that he finds it difficult to get up enthusiasm and eagerness for employing his time, thought, effort and capital in regions too far distant from “Broadway.”

With every desire to make at least some graceful concessions to the views held by the previous speaker, and probably by the majority of this audience, I am bound to conclude that I know of no practices which can justly be characterized as Economic Imperialism on the part of America.

3. *The Allegation of Financial Imperialism*

Lastly, as to Financial Imperialism: The facts are simple and patent. America holds half of the total available stock of the world's gold. Its people are prosperous and have a surplus of funds for investment. Many nations are in need of funds, and naturally turn to America.

The American banker acts as middleman between the lender and the borrower. His first function in that capacity is to investigate the solvency and stability of the applicant for funds. Next, he requires assurance that the proceeds of the loan desired are for legitimate and constructive purposes. He then negotiates terms, both as to the rate of interest and as to the special security (if any), requisite in order to make the loan palatable to the American investor. (I will not omit to add that these terms include a commission

for himself and those associated with him, but I will also add that, of late years, the rate of that commission has become practically as fixed and stereotyped by custom as that of a real estate broker or an architect.)

In making arrangements for terms and security, he must, of course, bear in mind that the ultimate provider of the funds desired to be raised, is not the banker, nor even the financial community, but the great army of investors. His own function is merely that of negotiator and distributor. The goods which he purchases are intended for resale to the public. They are not meant to remain on his shelves. If they do, it is proof of misjudgment, and if he falls into repeated misjudgment, the penalty is exhaustion of his working capital, and, eventually, probable failure. The essence of correct banking is that the banker must keep the bulk of his funds in liquid shape.

Therefore, in appraising the terms and the security required in the case of a loan to be offered to the public, the banker has two principal things in mind, namely, the salability of the bonds which he buys and the permanent solvency of the borrower. The public holds him, the banker, morally responsible for his recommendations, and the penalty of carelessness or poor judgment on his part is the withdrawal of the confidence and the patronage of the investor, i.e., the weakening, or even the destruction, of the very fundament on which his business rests.

Is it not perfectly manifest, that in the whole process of the dealings of the financier with the borrower there enters only one main question, namely, the plain question of business, and that there is neither room nor reason for the element of Imperialism?

One final function remains to be fulfilled before the banker, having completed mutually satisfactory negotiations with the prospective foreign borrower, whether a Government, or a Municipality, or a governmentally guaranteed or administered undertaking, offers his wares to the American investor. By custom, which has acquired the force of law, inquiry is made of the American State Department whether it sees any objection to the proposed transaction. An approving reply from Washington involves, of course, no kind of moral guaranty or pledge on the part of our governmental authorities. It involves merely an implied conclusion on the part of the State Department that the proposed loan is intended to serve a legitimate purpose and that its consummation is not inconsistent with the point of view of the American Government.

And that is all the State Department has to do with the matter, except to use its good offices if circumstances arise which jeopardize the rights or the safety of American capital placed, in good faith, in foreign countries. That is the limit of the Government's intercession. There is not a single instance when the armed forces of the American Government have been employed to collect

debts, or otherwise maintain the rights of American bankers, financiers, concessionaires or bondholders. The actuating motive for the use of such forces, in all cases when armed intercession was resorted to, was to enact national, not private, rights and duties. If among the results of establishing order and aiding to set up a proper system and administration of government were the fulfilment of due financial obligations and compliance with legal pledges, it remains true, nevertheless, that the bringing about of these rightful things was one of the effects of the action of the American Government, but was not, either in fact or in spirit, the reason, incentive or purpose which caused such action to be taken.

One other matter remains to be referred to, which, to the casual and perhaps not too benignantly inclined beholder, may have the appearance of imperialistic interference, but which in fact has no such purpose, meaning or effect. It has occurred (as it will doubtless continue to occur) that the willingness of American bankers and investors to loan funds to certain foreign countries was made dependent upon the American Government designating American citizens to administer special guarantees, pledged to secure the loan service, such as customs or similar specific sources of revenue. There is no more of Imperialism in our Government making such designation, as and if requested by borrower and lender, and in the exercising of such functions by the

persons so designated, than there is Imperialism in the action of Mr. Gilbert in exercising the functions of Reparation Agent under the provisions of the Dawes Report, by the common consent of Germany and the other nations concerned.

Most of the nations of the world, as well as many municipalities and industrial concerns abroad, are eagerly asking for accommodation in the shape of the loan of American dollars, to an extent, indeed, exceeding, for the time being, the inclination and capacity of American finance and the American investor. To call measurable compliance with such requests, on reasonable conditions as to security and otherwise, Financial Imperialism, is surely to attach a novel and strange meaning to that term.

When, after the close of the Civil War, Europe poured funds aggregating hundreds of millions of dollars into the United States (taking as security railroad and land mortgages) and thus provided the means for recovering from the effects of that struggle and for the development of American resources and opportunities, did she practice Financial Imperialism? If so, it seems to me that Lincoln's famous reply to the complaint of indulgence in whiskey-drinking, brought against a victory-winning General, may well be applied to that kind of Imperialism.

The tales of an unsophisticated and subservient State Department and a ruthless, treaty-dictating, world-manipulating Standard Oil or other "big

business" power are simply myths. The plain fact is that business men do not possess the super-qualities which, either in laudation or in condemnation, are frequently attributed to them. They have neither the craftiness and greed, with which they are charged, nor the profundity and far-sightedness, with which they are credited.

Having had some little experience with the inner workings of things, I have no hesitation in saying that while finance and "big business" have had occasion at times to act as servants of the State Department, they have never, within the period of my recollection, been permitted to be its masters. And I say further that not only have such services, generally, not been compensated, but that in more than one instance that I know of, they have involved both expense and effort, not recoverable either directly or indirectly.

It is astonishing how often legends about the power and sway of bankers spring into being, and how credulously they are accepted. For instance, the recent international loans to Austria and Germany have been the text for many stories telling how high finance, through the conditions governing these loans, reduced these countries to a state of vassalage to its power. The fact is that in neither of these cases did bankers have anything to do with determining the conditions which were basic for the loans. In the case of Austria, the conditions were established by the League of Nations. In the case of Germany, they

were fixed by the Dawes Commission and by the conference of Prime Ministers and Finance Ministers in London last summer.

All that the bankers were called upon to do, and did, was to assist in the working out of certain technical matters, and to advise what were the financial terms at which the proposed issues would appeal to investors, and, particularly, what were the assurances of stability, of security and of freedom from outside interference, which were requisite in order to enable them (the bankers) to take the responsibility of recommending the loans to investors in their respective countries. According to well-authenticated reports, the person most outspokenly in accord with the bankers' point of view in the latter aspect and most insistent in demanding compliance with it (not, of course, because it was the bankers' view, but because he believed it to be the right view), was none other than the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Labor Government of Great Britain, the Socialist Philip Snowden. And the then Prime Minister, the Socialist Ramsay MacDonald, rose in the House of Commons to declare that the bankers had in no way gone beyond the expression of such advice as had been asked of them, and that he gratefully acknowledged the value and the spirit of their services.

It is neither my function nor my inclination to claim a spotless record for American business, big or little. But I do claim that whatever other charge

may or may not lie against it, the charge of fostering or practicing Imperialism is without ground or warrant in fact.

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I have not tried to make an argument in respect of Imperialism "per se." I have not aimed either to defend or attack it. I have not sought to examine the question whether Imperialism, necessarily and in all contingencies, must be adjudged as evil and unwarrantable. I am merely saying that, according to my observations and judgment, Imperialism is not practiced by the Government or the people of the United States.

I am aware that my presentation of the case under discussion may engender the retort that it "doth protest too much." For debating purposes, it would doubtless have been good strategy to make my affirmations and denials less comprehensive. I can only say that if I had done so, I should have failed in adherence to what I believe to be the truth.

I am likewise aware that nothing lends itself more easily to scoffing and derision than the avowal of disinterestedness of purpose and decency of motives. I realize that the profession of one's belief in the genuineness of such avowals, especially in the case of nations, runs counter somewhat to prevailing intellectual fashions and is apt in many minds to create, against the person so professing, the presumption of gullibility, if not hypocrisy. Yet, I do not hesitate to confess that I am naive

enough to believe that one of the traditions and springs of action of the American people, consistent with a robust assertion of self-interest and self-counsel, is to do the fair and square thing by other nations, large or small, and, according to its lights, to endeavor to be a serviceable element toward the progress and welfare of humankind.

4. *A Few General Considerations*

May I trespass upon your patience for a little while longer to give expression to a few observations of a general character which, with your leave, I should like to submit to this gathering:

Let me begin by saying that, while I am not a Radical and while I wholly disbelieve in the theories of Socialism, I am far from being a "Standpatter." I yield respectful consideration to every opinion and every effort, the motives of which bear the hallmark of sincere and worthy purpose. I believe in progress and in the stimulus of intelligent and constructively directed discontent. I believe that the faults of Reaction, with the wars and repressions springing therefrom, have done more harm to the world than the faults of Radicalism. I am troubled by the reflection that, in too many cases, success in certain lines is too richly rewarded in proportion to the average yield, non-success too heavily penalized, that, too often, the same degree of effort meets with too uneven a measure of compensation, that too many of the trees of humankind, for

lack of sufficient light, warmth and sustenance, are stunted in their growth or even doomed wholly to wither and decay.

I believe that the mass of the American people want what is sensible and just and making for the general welfare. I believe that there is a vast majority who would gladly bring cheer and comfort if they are shown wretchedness and squalor, right if they are shown wrong, freedom if they are shown oppression. I believe it to be not a copy-book maxim but a sober and well-attested fact that the power of the spirit is far greater than that of the dollar, that the might of justice and right is far greater, ultimately, than that of selfishness, prejudice or greed.

Let me quote as a single but characteristic illustration in connection with this last sentence, the matter of woman suffrage. A great majority of American men were originally opposed to it, partly from reasoned conviction, partly from sentiment, partly from an instinct for the preservation of their "superiority," partly from apprehension that the enlargement of the electorate would strengthen the Radical vote. Yet when gradually it became plain to the average male voter that no argument based on justice could be sustained against the proposition of giving the suffrage to women, the opposition crumbled and woman-suffrage won.

Let me point out that such measures as, for instance, the progressive income-tax, collective bargaining by employees,

the eight-hour day, the governmental supervision and regulation of railroads and similar natural monopolies or semi-monopolies, are approved by the sense of justice of the business community, provided the application of such measures is kept within the limits of reason, and that they would not be repealed by business if it had the power to repeal them.

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What you Radicals and we who hold opposing views differ about, is not so much the end as the means, not so much what should be brought about as how it should and can be brought about, believing as we do, that rushing after the utopian is not only fruitless and ineffectual, but gets into the way of, and retards, progress towards realizing attainable improvement.

With all due respect, I venture to suggest that Radicalism too often tends to address itself more to theoretical perfection than to concrete amelioration; to phantom grievances or grievances of the past, which have lost their reality, rather than to actual matters of the day; to slogans, dogmas, professions, rather than to facts. Indeed, I have known leading Radical orators to bend and twist the necks of facts most mercilessly, if the poor, rigid facts happened to be facing in another direction than the speaker's arguments. I have known them to attribute all virtue to certain elements or sections of the community, and all evil to others; to lack in a sense

of proportion and in a homely appreciation of the realities; to advocate, in the name of Liberty, policies embodying the very reverse of individual freedom. I do not mean to be flippant when I say that the attitude and expressions of Radical spokesmen recall to my mind, at times, the story of the dissenting jurymen who complained that he had never met eleven such obstinate men.

Leaving aside the demands of orthodox Socialism, the platform of Radicalism demands, to quote only a few of its planks, governmental control of banking credits; government ownership of railways; such extension of Governmental functions as would mean a vastly augmented bureaucracy; extreme, if not throttling, taxation of accumulated capital; emasculating restraints in respect of the Supreme Court; the abolition of an Imaginary Imperialism, and so forth. I am frank to say that I do not see in what respect the attainment of these and similar things would prove of tangible benefit to the plain people.

I see, on the contrary, under the operation of the existing social and economic system—gradually and progressively adapting itself to the problems and conceptions of the day—an advancing tide in the well-being of the people, a growing assertion of the social conscience, a noteworthy diminution in the difference of the standard, and the contents, of living between the well-to-do and the masses. And I see further that almost all the leading positions in government, industry and finance are held

by sons of the plain people, who fought and won their way to the top.

That does not mean that I see ground for self-complacent satisfaction. Much indeed remains to be accomplished, and some of the things thus remaining call urgently to be attended to. The advent of the machine period, about a hundred years ago, and the subsequent development of large scale production in industry, while they have brought results of vast benefit to humanity in many ways, did also bring grave maladjustments and social ills, for which the world has not yet found completely adequate treatment or wholly effective remedies.

It seems to me the purpose of right-thinking leaders, of whatever political affiliations, should be to seek principally the tangible result of making the lives of the people steadily fuller and richer, of bringing into them more of joy, satisfaction and reward, of dislodging squalor, misery, drabness, oppression, denial of opportunity.

Of course, the preservation of liberty, the vigilance and protest against injustice, are, or ought to be, the paramount concern of all Americans, whatever their station or occupation. I would frankly question, however, whether alleged Imperialism, and such-like highly contentious matters do cut an appreciable and immediate figure in the life of the average worker and his family, for good or ill. But, providing him with better housing; abolishing ugly and degrading tenements; creating parks and adequate playgrounds; establishing well-equipped,

clean and airy hospitals; furnishing quick and comfortable transportation; safeguarding him against unemployment, sickness and old age; seeing to it that he has sanitary and dignified working conditions, his due say, adequate opportunity, and a fair chance to share in the fruits of industry; making the administration of justice less cumbersome, complex and expensive; giving to him and his family ample access to knowledge, art, beauty, and culture—these and similar things do mean genuine and concrete additions to his enjoyment and contentment and to the value of his life.

Such things are not controversial in their essence as between Radicals, Liberals and Conservatives, their benefits are not debatable, and they are assuredly obtainable. Cannot we all join hands in trying to bring them about?

Extreme claims will only produce extreme resistance. Undue pressure will inevitably cause commensurate counter-pressure. Exaggerated pronouncements will produce exaggerated apprehensions.

Is it quite illusory to dream—in this land, favored as it is beyond all others with those things which make for widely diffused prosperity and ought to make for progress and happiness—that well-intentioned and thoughtful men, without yielding their respective convictions and ultimate aims, may declare a truce for a while and unite upon attempting to accomplish those things which most need to be done?

Granting you the privilege, if you so wish, to look upon Conservatives as oppressors, despoilers or besotted and upon Liberals as ineffectual, outmoded or trimmers, and reserving for Conservatives and Liberals the privilege to reciprocate in kind, is it really quite idle to hope that we may cease to accentuate and propagate friction, antagonism and bitterness, and, agreeing upon certain limited objectives desired by all right-minded men, that we may find a bridge across which we can all walk towards the attainment of those objectives for the common welfare of the American people?

